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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in the workforce is increasing, spurred by inflation, the rising level of consumer aspirations, the increasing number of families headed by women as a consequence of divorce, and the declining birth rate. However, the work women do continues to be segregated from men's and comparatively poorly paid, while women still carry the burden of working for pay and working in the home. Men's and women's work lives differ sharply, yet norms for describing and judging women's work performance are derived from men's experience and based on the expectation of uninterrupted school-to-retirement work life. Policy makers have been slow to recognize and act on these inequities: women are still treated as though they have a choice (a choice essentially denied to men) of whether to work or stay home. Hence their problems are viewed as personal rather than societal. Society, au fond, still defines women's roles as those of wives and mothers. Suggested changes include a positive outreach to women as employable persons, introduction of a "dynamic vocational training program," maternity insurance, a parental infant care leave for both sexes (including time for care of sick children), provision of child care in subsidized programs, and elimination of sex role stereotyping everywhere. (CP)

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THE EFFECTS ON THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY OF THE GROWING NUMBER
OF WOMEN IN THE WORK FORCE

Alice H. Cook

Today's woman has a very different life cycle from that of her mother.

She will live longer; she will work at some time in her life for wage or salary or at a profession, and she will work more years; she will have fewer children, a factor in her longer working life and in her earlier return to work after having children; she runs a greater risk of divorce and, as a consequence, of being the single head of family responsible for the support of herself and her child or children; she will be better educated; she will move into a work environment where she has the right to expect equal pay and equal job opportunities with men.

In certain respects, however, mother's and daughter's experiences and prospects will not differ all that radically. Women's jobs are still predominantly in five or six major occupational categories, quite distinct from the occupations men move into. They are in professional jobs related to serving and caring for people, light work in industry including chiefly textiles, clothing and electronic assembly, routine office work, retail, non-commission sales; and service jobs such as hairdressing, waitressing and cleaning. All of these by comparison with men's work are low-paid, routine, low-ceilinged jobs, supervised for the most part by men, for women only exceptionally rise to managerial and top administrative posts. As the National Council on Working Women points out,

- 94% of all typists are women
- 78% of all clerical workers are women
- 95% of all private household workers are women
- less than 10% of skilled workers are women
- less than 5% of top management jobs go to women¹⁾

Yet women are the presumable and intended beneficiaries of legislation of a very radical sort, calling for equal pay, and equal educational and job opportunities with men. Yet these laws fall far short of realization of the

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equality in working life which they were presumably designed to achieve.

What is the current situation in respect to women's work life?

1. The employment ratio of women has been steadily rising since the end of World War II. During the War, 19 million women were at work, making up 36% of the work force and representing 38% of the adult female population. Although 3 million women were dismissed from work as the men returned from the war, 19 million were again at work by 1953 and by 1965 working women again made up 35% of the labor force and 39% of the adult female population. Today there are about 40 million women in the labor force of roughly 103 millions. Their numbers have doubled since 1950 and women account for nearly 60% of the total increase in the civilian labor force in that period. Something like 90% of all women today will work or have worked at some time in their lives.²⁾ This is a situation never before faced in modern society, not even in wartime.

2. Projections are that these trends will continue, though in a somewhat decelerated fashion. The President's 1978 Report on Employment and Training³⁾ foresees 48.7 million women in the labor force in 1990, or a 42.7% participation rate (the proportion of women working of total women of working age). Considerably more women than men will enter the labor force as new workers and by 1990 women will make up 42% of the entire working population. The most radical change will be in the increase of women working in the age group between 25 and 34, exactly the years which until recently represented the period when women dropped out of the labor force to have children. By 1980 their numbers will have doubled over those of 1970. Women in the 35 to 44 year cohort will also have greatly increased. In both cases both the rate and the numbers of women working in these years will exceed the numbers of men entering these age groups.⁴⁾ Black women whose labor force participation rate has always been higher than white women's, will decline somewhat from its high point of 48.9% in 1970 to 46.9% in 1985.⁵⁾ In the 30 years between 1960 and 1990, men's participation rate will have declined from 82.6% to 77.3% while women's will have increased from 36% to 51.4%.

3. An increasing number of working women will be married. At present well over half, almost 60%, of all women working are married and 44% of all married women are in the labor force. As the numbers of the 25-45 year cohorts increase according to the projections, these percentages will climb sharply. Almost 50% of all women with children under the age of 18 are now in the labor force and these include 40% of all women with children under the age of 6. This figure has more than tripled since the end of the war.⁷⁾

The picture painted in the late 50s by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein with their Women's Two Roles: Home and Work that first called attention to the growing trend of married women to work, divided women's adult lives into three parts: work until marriage or the birth of the first child; withdrawal from the labor market while having and raising children; re-entry into the labor market after an absence of 12 to 20 years. This picture no longer obtains. The period of withdrawal^a from the labor market diminishes year by year as the birth rate falls and as the economic pressures on women to work rise. More and more women work continuously with only short intervals of leave at the time of the birth of their child or children and the period of withdrawal^a shortens. This means that women now in their young and middle years will have accumulated more years of work experience by their retirement than was true 20 years ago.⁸⁾

4. An increasing number of families are headed by women. In part this is a product of the rising divorce rate and of the growing tendency not to marry. About 7.5 million families or 1 in 8 are headed by women. Of these, 54% are in the labor force. Some 10% of all women workers are family heads and there is a close relationship between these and the total number of families living in poverty.⁹⁾

5. One reason why these families are so poor is that women's wages everywhere are on the average lower than men's. Women earn on the average 27% less than men. The worst difference is in sales where they earn only 45% as much as men. As clerical workers they earn 65% of men's salaries and as operatives 60%. As service workers women earn 64% of men's averages and as craft workers 61%.¹⁰⁾ The earnings gap widens year by year in the professions,

as well as in the salaried jobs. Some important part of these pay differentials represents women's shorter terms in the labor market and thus less experience at a given age than men have. In part, as Barbara Bergman has pointed out, women's lower pay is a product of their overcrowding of the occupations to which they are customarily restricted. In part it is accounted for by less opportunity and less attention to gaining vocational and professional education. But a substantial part of the differential, as a number of studies have had to conclude, is attributable simply to discrimination.¹¹⁾

Women earn less than men not because they are being paid less for the same work, but because the jobs reserved for women pay less than the jobs in which men work. This circumstance gives rise to the present slogan not of "equal pay for equal work" but of "equal pay for work of comparable value," a demand which challenges our present systems of job evaluation and job classification.

6. Most working women carry the double burden of working for pay and working in the home. Cross-national as well as national studies of who does the housework show that women get very little help from their husbands or children when they go outside the home to work.¹²⁾ This fact alone means that women have little time for classes, meetings, leisure activities or self-improvement. For this reason, many of them pull back from taking on jobs at higher pay and more responsibility when these mean travel away from home or much overtime work. One solution they turn to is part-time work. Over 80% of it is done by women; men who work parttime are for the most part students or retirees. Parttime work has many advantages for women at certain periods of their work lives but it is rated very low in the world of work. It often disqualifies women from many fringe benefits; it practically rules out opportunities for selection for training or advancement since it is perceived as an indication of only marginal commitment to work, a no-no in a company's consideration of where and in whom to invest in job training. In short, it can become a lifetime handicap for the women who undertake it, even in evaluating them for full-time work when they are ready to return to it.

One conclusion to be derived from this profile is that men's and women's work lives differ sharply in every important dimension. Yet most of the norms for describing and judging performance in work are derived from the experience of men and are based on the expectation that they work uninterruptedly from school-leaving to retirement as family "breadwinners." Little wonder that equality legislation by itself falls short of the mark at which it aims. My colleague, Joe Pleck, will speak about how the trends I am describing affect and alter the lives of men. But for the present, women are being judged in their work performance, their chances for training and advancement, their wages and salaries, by standards which are fitted neither to their experience nor their possibilities. Small wonder they are often treated as inadequates or inferiors.

Policy makers to whom we look for change in both public and private sectors move all too slowly toward equal employment opportunity because while they know something about men's economic behavior, they know almost nothing about women's, and what they know tends to be based on outworn assumptions. The studies addressed to the question of why women work are an attempt to fill this gap. But underlying this question is the assumption that working is for women deviant behavior, while for men it is normal. No such inquiry is addressed to a male population. Yet negative judgments about the rentability of investment in education and training for women are based on experience derived from men's uninterrupted work careers. Lifetime studies of women and the consequences of investment in their training - if we had them - would certainly show different results from those of men, but would that relationship be negative, as is widely assumed? Probably not.

Take the matter of giving women "choice" of whether to work in the market or to work at home. Society places a high valence on this "choice" for women; it essentially denies it to men. Their choices are among jobs and careers. But when women make the "choice" to work at home, they hopelessly handicap themselves in the labor market, and the value of the work they have chosen to do is disregarded in computing the GNP. Women's choice of jobs and careers once they have opted ~~for~~ the labor market is nevertheless seriously and societally

restricted. Social policy, both what is explicit and what is unstated, vacillates between these alternatives. In the meantime most studies both here and abroad of why women work show that unmistakably they work, as men do, for economic reasons.

Or, when we look at the statistics which guide policy judgments, ~~we find~~ them similarly saturated with assumptions about women's and men's roles. Legislation consequently similarly reflects the ambivalent nature of the assumptions on which it rests in a day when equality is presumably the overriding policy. Carolyn Bell Shaw points out that

Under both federal and state legislation, women are assigned dependent status as wives or widows of wage earners. Other legislation assigns a dependent status - dependent on government - to women as mothers or caretakers of children. This occurs in Aid to Families of Dependent Children and to some extent in Social Security payments to widows with children.

She goes further:

Both state and federal inheritance tax laws contain provisions that make the wife or widow a dependent and many court rulings do this in division of property in divorce or separation proceedings. Finally the income tax laws have provisions for married couples that clearly originated in the presumption that wives were economically dependent on husbands.¹³

The answer to the question of why equality legislation has accomplished so little in equalizing wages and opportunities is to be found here. Society au fond, defines women's role as that of wife and mother and sees her labor market activity as exceptional or even deviant behavior. Put another way, the 20th century western, industrialized, market economy rests on assumptions about women which derive from the 19th. As Alan Pifer, President of the Carnegie Corporation, has put it,

Social policies have not yet caught up with changing social practice. Nowhere is this disparity between reality and myth as the foundation for social policy more evident than in regard to the large-scale movement of women into the labor force - a phenomenon that could have consequences of immense magnitude for the nation.¹⁴

What structural changes need to be taken in the labor market to realize goals of sex equality? I suggest ^{five} ~~four~~ dimensions of change:

- a positive outreach to include women in the pool of employables in every occupational sector with selection, at least for the next decade, based on an attempt to maintain some equilibrium between male and female workers. [The Equal Employment guidelines define this in terms of their respective representation in the labor market and qualified for the particular type of work. The Swedes aim at a 60-40 ratio in every type of occupation-- of men in child care and women in the metal trades.
- the adoption of what Eliane Vogel-Polsky in her report for the ILO¹⁵ calls "the application of dynamic vocational training policies," for without these the proportions of women qualified for skilled and managerial positions, to name only two kinds of occupations, will not be in the pool of candidates. Such a proposal implies opening apprenticeships not just to school leavers but to adults. It implies further providing subsidies in support, for transportation, tuition, supplies and child care where needed to enable adults to maintain themselves and their families during a training period. I have suggested elsewhere that we think of a "maternal bill of rights" comparable to the GI Bill of Rights, offered to women who, like the GIs, left the workforce in their 20s, the one to go to war; the other to have a child or children.¹⁶ (Such a program need not be limited to women but ought to include training possibilities for both sexes who through technological change, plant movements or other structural dislocations in the labor market must prepare for new careers. In Europe where such programs have been offered, more than half the takers are women.)
- the provision of child care in a subsidized program of alternatives perhaps under a voucher system which would allow parents to select among home care, care in other families, care in centers; among half-day, whole day, whole week care, care after school and during school holidays and vacations; care of sick children; care by parents them-

selves of infants or newly adopted children on paid leave for periods up to a year or two or even three. All of these kinds of programs exist as working models in other countries.

- reform of the system of values among the agents of socialization - the family, schools, cultural environment and the mass media. One example, already in place in many institutions of higher learning is the establishment of a Center for Continuing Education that provides financial assistance and counselling for mature students, most of them women, returning to college to complete interrupted degree work and able for the most part to study only part time. A similar and perhaps equally significant addition to the programs of community colleges would be not only to welcome mature women as enrolling students in vocational programs but to direct their attention to the skilled trades beyond the usual range of women's work. And since community colleges are closely linked to their local labor markets, they are in a position to encourage employers to accept women graduates in trades reserved now for men. In this area of value reform, schools are important and indeed indispensable change agents.

If values are really to change in the schools and colleges however we have to give serious attention to/eliminating the causes of the frequent charges of sex harassment, to re-writing texts and lectures and teaching materials to do away with sex stereotypes and to present the world of training and work as open to all qualified graduates.

- the demand for equal pay for work of comparable value is very far-reaching, more far-reaching than it sounds at first hearing. It involves an examination of the content of every job for elements of the work environment, stress measured not simply in terms of "light" and "heavy" but of nervous strain, monotony, variation, restricted use of muscles, standing, immobility, the content and form of communication of directives and so on. The Swedes in their Work Environment studies and the Germans in the research underlying

their approach to eliminating the so-called "light wage categories" in their wage scales have produced models for new approaches to job evaluation.

Today's woman is not only handicapped by out-of-date social attitudes and social policies; these very circumstances handicap her in taking advantage of the laws written to broaden her opportunity at school and at work, and to improve her earning power.

Projections for the year 2000 show that all of the present occupational groups in which women's employment is high, except teaching, private households and farm labor, will increase. At the same time the increasing number of college educated women, deprived of teaching opportunities, will almost necessarily result in a significant movement of women into traditionally male-dominated occupations, in addition to the effects of the law in this regard. The need therefore for adapting curricula, counselling and career planning for women to these facts is evident. "Women's opportunities for rewarding employment will be directly related to their level of skill and experience, and to the labor market demands in the decades ahead," notes the Handbook on Women, issued by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor.¹⁷⁾

Women's movement into the labor force is, to repeat Allan Pifer, "a phenomenon that can have consequence of immense magnitude for the nation."

Footnotes

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